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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 003649

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/15/2017

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SUBJECT: DEATH OF A CONGRESSMAN: BASILAN'S COMPLEX CURRENTS

REF: A. MANILA 2369 (ARROYO ORDERS RULE OF LAW FOR

PERPETRATORS OF BEHEADINGS)

[1](#)B. MANILA 2358 (JOINT COMMITTEE TO INVESTIGATE
ARMED CLASHES IN BASILAN)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The death of controversial Basilan Congressman Wahab Akbar in an explosion outside the Congressional building November 13 was perhaps least a surprise to him. While a powerful politician with strong public support on his island province, he also acknowledged that he had many enemies, not least from his days with the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group and his background as a drug and gun runner. Though a relative newcomer to politics, he was successfully creating a political dynasty that includes one of his four wives as governor of Basilan province and another as mayor of Isabela, Basilan's capital. However, he was running up against his former terrorist colleagues; the powerful Ampatuan clan, which controls the Muslim Autonomous region that includes Basilan; and elements of the Philippine security forces and Muslim insurgents, some of whom suspected him of involvement in the July beheadings of 10 Marines on Basilan. His relations with other political and extremist factions on Basilan were equally fraught. The Philippine National Police are working to establish the cause of the explosion and determine whether this was a targeted assassination -- given his long list of enemies -- or a more general bombing of the House of Representatives that happened to take him. The Ambassador conveyed condolences to Akbar's wife, House Speaker De Venecia and Malacanang Executive Secretary Ermita and offered USG assistance in the

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investigation. She also commended the government for its careful public stance on the incident, and not jumping to any hasty conclusions. Akbar's congressional seat will remain open until the next elections in 2010, unless Congress calls for a special election to fill the seat and appropriates the funds. While the military situation on Basilan has improved significantly in the months since the July Philippine Marine beheadings, the Congressman's death could roil both the political and security situation there. End Summary.

Deadly Explosion

[1](#)2. (U) At approximately 8:00 p.m. on November 13, at the close of the day's legislative session, a bomb reportedly strapped to a parked motorcycle exploded at the driveway of the House of Representatives' south wing lobby. The explosion killed three, including Basilan's lone

Representative Wahab Akbar, one driver and a staffer. At least 8 others were injured, including Gabriela Party-list Representative Luz Ilagan and Negros Oriental Representative Pryde Henry Teves, nephew of Finance Secretary Gary Teves. Philippine police and security authorities are presently investigating the incident.

Journey to Congress

13. (C) Akbar was among the more controversial figures in Basilan's violent sub-culture of "guns, goons, and gold." Born into abject poverty, Wahab wore many hats in his journey to the halls of Congress -- laborer, heavy equipment operator, truck driver, bakery and fishpond owner, seafood broker, self-confessed cigarette smuggler, former deputy commander of the Moro National Liberation Front, co-founder of the terrorist Abu Sayaaf Group, and Basilan Governor. An alleged drug user and trafficker who previously studied Islamic theology in Syria for five years, Akbar also prided himself as a religious preacher.

Many Enemies

14. (C) With four wives and numerous children, Akbar's fiefdom on Basilan was composed of family members cum politicians, including the current governor and mayors of at least three municipalities. While building his political fortunes with assistance from reputed Muslim "godfather" Andal "Andy" Ampatuan, Akbar made many bitter enemies. Former Basilan Congressman Gerry Salapuddin, who was defeated by Akbar's wife in the May 14, 2007, gubernatorial elections, and Party-list Congressman Mujib Hataman, whose brother lost to Akbar for a seat in Congress, accused Akbar of

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embezzlement of public funds; illegal procurement and distribution of firearms; and assistance to members of the terrorist Abu Sayaaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah. Akbar's widely rumored political ambitions to replace Ampatuan's son as regional governor of the Muslim autonomous region angered the patriarch of the Ampatuan clan.

15. (C) Akbar was also accused by some sectors as the politician behind the July 10 beheadings of ten Philippine Marines on Basilan. While identifying four suspected perpetrators of the beheadings during a July 31 speech to Congress, Akbar claimed that 80 per cent of Muslims in Mindanao were sympathetic to the Abu Sayyaf, and blamed the Armed Forces of the Philippines for triggering the "Basilan incident" by intruding into a Moro Islamic Liberation Front controlled area without proper coordination.

Status of Investigation and Embassy Support

16. (C) The Philippine National Police contacted the RSO office shortly after the Nov. 13 explosion to notify the Embassy of the incident. Around 2200 hrs, the Philippine National Police requested the use of Embassy explosives detection equipment to help determine the nature of the materials used in the blast. The Embassy RSO office conducted the analysis and found traces of the explosive PETN on items recovered from the site. The Philippine National Police are in charge of the ongoing investigation and are conducting post-blast analysis. At this point, the police have told the Embassy that they believe an improvised explosive device was placed in the gas tank of a nearby motorcycle and detonated as Akbar exited the Congress building. Police also have told the Embassy that their initial assessment is that Akbar was the target of the bomb.

¶7. (U) The Ambassador offered condolences to the Governor of Basilan, one of the Congressman's wives, who was clearly distraught but appreciative of the expression of sympathy. The Ambassador also voiced U.S. sympathy and concern to House Speaker Jose De Venecia and Malacanang Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita. She offered Ermita USG assistance to the Philippine National Policy in its blast investigation, and commended him on the Philippine government's careful and cautious handling of the situation, including not making any hasty public pronouncements on the cause or reasons for the blast.

Filling Akbar's Congressional Seat

¶8. (C) At this time, it is too early to determine if or when Akbar,s congressional seat will be filled. The Commission on Elections could hold special elections in Basilan to fill his seat, but not without Congressional legislation first. Congress must pass a bill to declare the seat vacant and call on the Commission to hold the special election, as well as appropriate additional funds for the administration of the election. Under Philippine law, the election must be held and the position filled not earlier than 60 days and not later than 90 days after Congress declares the vacancy. A Commission official told poloff that in this specific case Congress may pass the required legislation for the special election out of respect for their fallen colleague. The last such special election was in 2002 when a congressman was convicted of murder. If no special election is called, Akbar,s seat will remain vacant until the next national elections in 2010.

Press Stance

¶9. (U) Mission released the following public statement on the incident on November 14:

The U.S. Embassy wishes to express shock and dismay over the explosion that occurred outside the Philippine Congress the night of November 13. We offer heartfelt condolences to the loved ones of those who were killed, and hope for a speedy recovery for those injured.

U.S. Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney called House Speaker Jose De Venecia to convey the Embassy,s sorrow and condolences to all those who play a role in the important work of the Philippine House of Representatives.

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We stand ready to provide assistance to the Philippine National Police and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines in their investigation of the explosion.

Comment

¶10. (C) The coming days will see countless theories on why Akbar died, and who might have been behind it. Already there is speculation his death was the result of a political struggle for control of the island or perhaps the work of ideological rivals who want to take Basilan down a more radical path. Others have suggested that this was retribution from elements of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, who believe that Akbar was behind the July beheadings of the Marines. At this point, there is no clear evidence to support any theory, but it seems likely that with his many family members and political followers, additional acts of retribution or violence are possible. With U.S. forces operating in and around Basilan in support of Philippine Armed Forces activities, all Embassy elements will

continue to monitor events on Basilan and Mindanao closely in the coming days and weeks.

KENNEY